

THE USE OF THEATRE AS A COLLECTIVE ENTERPRISE IN DISSEMINATING LITERATURE TO CHILDREN

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Historically, theatre that plays specifically to young audiences in Malaysia is a phenomenon which is traced back to the Colonial period 1910 to 1930, where Shakespearean plays and western plays were performed at the dramatic clubs in English- administered schools. In the early years of Malaysian modern theatre between 1950's to 1970's, there was no special theatre for young audiences. In the early years of children's theatre development, during the 70's, theatre for young audiences was still being performed by adults. Teacher trainees at the Language Training Centre performed plays in schools and for young audiences. Adult theatre group from Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka performed plays for young audiences. Only later, the Memorial Library in Kuala Lumpur established its own children's theatre group and plays are performed with the objective of inculcating the children to read. And in the 1980's, further development is seen as the Library Association Of Malaysia took a step to inculcate and nurture the reading habit of children by holding workshop that had them work with puppetry which culminated into a puppet theatre performance performed by the Children Theater Group led by Aminah Salam. Aminah had also dramatized popular and known children stories into puppet theatre. Around the same time too, the Arts Centre at the University Sains Malaysia took the bold initiative to train children between 9 to 17 in creative play, using local legend and folk tale and came out with a production of *Garuda*, which went on tour around the country and to Singapore.

The last twenty years has seen changes in the scale and style of children's theatre and this speaks well for the future of children's theatre. This paper looks at three different theatre groups and their productions of children's theatre, each is a collaborative work between patient and enthusiastic theatre practitioners and children from as young as five years old. They took different approaches, with different objectives and goals using well-known stories from the English literature, Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*, Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist* and from the Arabian tale, the classic *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. The *Jungle Book* is an all children cast of 10 to 12 year olds, *Oliver Twist the Musical* is a combination of children and adults, with children taking the characters of children and adults taking on adult roles

whereas *Ali Baba the Musical* has children playing the roles of adults whilst the main role, Ali Baba is anchored by a popular television celebrity artist.

The Five Arts Centre, one of the country's theatre groups is one of the pioneer groups in the country that started producing Theatre-in Education, a form of theatre with an educational focus, but with adult actors performing for young audiences. However, in 1992, the Five Arts Centre started a Program called *Teater Muda* (Youth Theatre) which is specifically for young people between the ages of 10 to 16.

Participants of the program were given a 6 month training of the theatre arts where they are introduced to the basic elements of music, movement, drama and visual arts. Professional artists were roped in to facilitate the learning process. Children were totally involved in improvisation, role-play, games and problem-solving techniques and introduced to a variety of traditional and contemporary arts. They are tutored in the traditional music of the *gamelan* to being a puppeteer in the *Wayang Kulit*. The program was done in four phases and as many as 100 children have been trained in the phases. Young people from Phases 1, 2, participated in the production of *Suara Rimba* (Voice of the Jungle, an adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*) and those from phases 3 and 4 participated in a devised play of the Indian mythology, *Rama and Sita*.

Kipling is one of the most popular writers in English in the early 20th century. His novel, the *Jungle Book* is a collection of stories that tell the experiences of the human child, Mowgli who wanders off from his nearby village and gets adopted and raised by wolves. He grows up and learns the ways of the jungle and he learns also the ways of other animals with who he shares the jungle. He is accepted as one of them. However when he is exposed to human beings, he begins to question his own identity and is saddened by the greed and destruction of humans who invade the jungle. Although the story of Mowgli is set in colonial India, research was not done on its history or culture. At the workshop, children familiarize themselves with characters from Malaysian local folktales and legends. Children are given room to play imaginatively and creatively. They explore issues of the law of the jungle, safety of individuals, families and communities.

Instead of serving the text, *Suara Rimba* performance treats the text as a source of inspiration for a staging an improvisational creative dramatics which takes the Malaysian traditional theatre as its model under the guidance of a few facilitators. Participants for *Suara Rimba* (Voice of the Jungle) which was an adaptation of Kipling's *Jungle Book*, were selected through an audition process. A consideration had been given to a balanced participation in aspects of age, gender and social background. The emphasis is on the participants and their abilities to analyze the text, the meaning, understand the characters and portray them through the fiction and using their imagination, build them up. The process is as important as the product. The performance takes a bare outline of the classic

novel but the theme is determined by the director at the initial stage. The director has the story and the idea, and puts her devising abilities to translate the idea into a theatrical event which will engage the participants. What is interesting is, as the play opens in the jungle, the gamelan music reinforces the animal sounds made by actors with the jungle sounds. There is no true sense of place and time with regard to setting. Atmosphere and mood is given by the traditional music of gamelan. The movements of the animals incorporate local content and form, for example, making use of the cultural steps of the *silat*, the Malay martial art in the fighting scene. The staging techniques using the theatre in the round are adapted from the Malaysian traditional theatre. Traditional and contemporary design is also synthesized in the costumes and make-up.

Suara Rimba introduces the audience to wolves who discuss the violence that humans are capable of. The wolves are portrayed as civilized; they have a council that determines every aspect of their lives, from the rearing of their cubs to the interaction with each other. They show great compassion as Mother Wolf loves and protects the Man Cub when the Tiger Shere Khan threatens the Man Cub. Mowgli's sibling wolves have a time when they teach him the ways of wolves and play with him. The focus of the play and the message of this play is that man ought to respect all life and respect the forests. We also see how Mowgli and various animals face dangers and learn how to overcome them. Participants learn about evil in the jungle and evil as represented by humans.

Mowgli raised by wolves, and abducted by monkeys have a great friendship with Bagheera the Panther and Baloo the Bear, who set out to rescue him when he is confronted by Shere Khan the tiger- these provide the children with opportunities for imaginative role-taking and problem-solving situations. They need to think about the needs of others and value friendships. It allows children to participate in modes of communication and expression in their games, in movements new to them.

Children as characters in the play make decisions and discover what is right and wrong and this is moral development. And in play, as they take on collaborative role, they learn to care for each other, respect, listen carefully to each other, put forward their ideas, help each other out, and try to solve problems. Drama involves children in concrete (fictional) situations where they see examples of how the world operates which in turn help them build their own moral and social code. Drama helps children develop self-reflection, a key factor of a moral life.

The project also helps children to cultural development as it provides them the opportunities to appreciate their own cultural traditions and the richness of other cultures. Elements of traditional Malaysian theatre that are employed in the devised theatre give the participants a sense of the community.

In contrast, the production of *Ali Baba The Musical*, which is taken from the classic Arabian tale, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* is a mega production which is a combination of dance,

songs and comedy acted by 83 children staged at the National Theatre from 19th December to 28th December 2006. These 83 children are chosen out of 400 children who auditioned for the play. The original story of Ali Baba is staged and tailored for family event and particularly for children audience.

Malaysia's celebrity artist, who is also a host for a popular children's television show, Aznil Nawawi takes the role of the leader of the thieves. Children as young as 10 take the other lead roles of being the poor wood cutter, Ali Baba, the rich brother Cassim Baba, their wives and Marjina the wise slave girl. They sing solo, duets and in group and they dance and act. The other 77 children take the supporting role of thieves, villagers, traders, servants, auctioneer, animals, rocks, and birds. Most interesting is the role of the sergeant of the gang of thieves, played by a special-need boy, six-year old Putera Syamil Haikal who has a weak nerve disorder and walks with a limp. His natural and spontaneous comic routines leave the audience in stitches throughout the one and half hour play.

Ali Baba the Musical is set in another land of fantasy with exotic Arabian costumes and flying sets. The line of conflict is clear, the good will defeat the bad. It tells children not to tell lies, be generous, help those who are less fortunate, cooperate and do not steal. The story tells of Ali Baba, a poor woodcutter who happens to encounter a group of forty thieves and their treasure store in a cave in the woods. When the thieves are gone, Ali Baba enters the cave and takes some of the treasure home. His rich brother, Cassim heard of Ali's unexpected wealth, learns about the treasure in the cave, and soon goes there. But in his greed and excitement he forgets the magic words that open the cave door and soon get caught red-handed by the thieves. They kill him. Ali looks for his brother, finds the body and gives him a burial. The thieves finding the body gone, realize that somebody else know their secret. They set out to find the man. They found Ali Baba, and plan to kill him during the night, but the plan is foiled by the servant girl, Marjina. She pours hot boiling oil over the thieves hidden in empty jars. Finding them all dead, the leader of the thieves flee. The slave girl Marjina is given her freedom by Ali Baba.

The musical begins with a charming overture set in the jungle, and little children as young as five danced as lizards, snake birds, rocks and trees. The opening dance is cute and heart-warming and sets the tone for the production. Because of the size of the production, children are divided into age groups quickly and straightaway given specific tasks. Roles are given to the actors, dialogues memorized, actions and business are blocked. They are not grouped together to talk about the story or its literary values, rather they are taught the dance steps and routines and trained by a professional choreographer, the older children are given acting lessons by an acting teacher, and vocal for singing by a vocal teacher. Every effort is made to polish the performance, to give technical support like costumes, scenery, props, lighting and make-up which contribute to the total theatre experience for children audiences. This is children's theatre. There is strong directing from an imaginative theatre

artist. The children are convincing characters who work in an ensemble in the situation that arouses laughter, joy and pride.

Drama is powerful in the way that it can introduce the child to the world. It can give an understanding of themselves and of others. They have to take into account of what other characters say, think and feel because it involves the child having to work with others, to play at life issues with them dramatically. That in turn requires them to know more about themselves, to think about what they are, believe in and aim for. The lead child-actors have admitted that being involved in drama developed their interactional skills, they learn to listen to each other, they hold on to an idea, they compromise and they have to cooperate. What they enjoyed the most is being a character in a different social setting and having an adventure of a lifetime.

The children's musical *Oliver Twist* offers a different kind of experience as the young director with a Diploma of Performing Arts, Nawfal works with a combination of street kids, elementary school kids and adult students of the Academy of Performing Arts. It was performed for two nights to children and adult audiences at the Experimental Theatre with live band in 2009. The street kids are from NurSalam, a Shelter for the Homeless, which is a Non-Profit Organization, a centre for very young children and teenagers from the neighborhood Chow Kit. 400 children are currently enrolled and about 50 to 100 come to the Centre on a given day. 5 currently live there full time in the dormitory space. Most of the children are from the Chow Kit area, but there are also children who have come to the area from other parts of the country who may have been victims of human trafficking, they may also be refugees or stateless- children, that is without official Identification papers. Most children come from one-parent homes, and many children are the children of sex workers or drug addicts. Chow Kit is a sub district in central Kuala Lumpur. It has a daily wet market, the largest wet market which is tourist attraction in Kuala Lumpur. It has also lively night market. It is also known as the red-light district of Kuala Lumpur. A reporter, Dina Zaman reports about the "Faceless Street Kids of Chow Kit" in the newspaper, The Star (July 31 2008)

Rooms are let for RM19 a day and renewed daily. Families are known to sacrifice their meager earnings for a room instead of buying a tin of baby formula for their month-old baby because the room is home. Children play in the streets, toddlers, babies are left unattended while parents who are drug addicts, immigrants or migrants from the rural area go looking for their dreams....There is a 10 year-old excellent student who pimps for his mother; mothers who entertains clients in the daily-rented room with their young children in the corner watching silently; a father drug user accompanied by his so because he has no home.

Nur Salam provides children two meals a day and a safe place to come in from the streets. They have educational programs like tutoring in basic reading and mathematics. Nawfal volunteers to read to the children once a week, and started to read to them the novel, *Oliver Twist*. During the reading, they explore the characters, the values and relationships.

They have to get a real grasp on the characters first before they express the characters physically. Only later, the director holds several acting workshops with the children, playing theatre games and doing improvisations, they play roles, and do simulations based on ideas, and scenes from the novel. The director then evaluates what their collective abilities and talents are as this will affect his choice of play. If singers are available, a musical maybe the choice, if not it would have to be a realistic play. He finds *Oliver Twist* to be the perfect choice as it has a clear, interesting plot development, interesting action, easily recognizable by the children: of pick-pocketing, the act of getting caught, and being in front of the magistrates. The script stimulates thoughts, stimulates emotions and in turn, young children in the audience for the two performances are challenged, enlightened and entertained.

Oliver Twist is written by Charles Dickens in 1838. It is his best-known work and has been made into a film, adapted to television series, and recently, to a musical. It is a social novel and calls public attention to the various evils of the time, the astounding number of orphans in London, and the sad conditions of child labor, and their easy exposure to criminal life. It tells the story of the boy, Oliver who is born into a life of misfortune, orphaned at birth, he is brought up in the first eight years at a baby farm with little food and comforts. At nine years old, he is put to work at the workhouse. He toils with little food until one day the desperately hungry boys draw lots, the loser must ask for another portion of broth. It falls on Oliver, and with bowl in hand makes the request. An uproar follows, and Oliver is sent away to work with an undertaker as a mourner at children's funerals. After several beatings, Oliver breaks down and sings the touching song "Where is Love?" He runs away and reaches London where he meets with the Artful Dodger who works for Fagin, a criminal. He gets food and lodging and realizes too late what they do, and what his task is to pick pockets. On his first outing, he gets caught but the gentleman who caught him takes a liking to Oliver and takes him home to care for him. However, Fagin finds him and is brought back to criminal life. He is forced to participate in a robbery, gets shot and wounded. The people of the house are convinced of his innocence, and Oliver is nursed back to health by Rose Maylie. After more adventure and brushes with Fagin's criminals, Oliver finds out that Rose is his long-lost mother's sister.

There is good story to tell. And when a story is told, it has an aim, it must capture the imagination, and another aim which is closely related is how the story is used to give meaning and to make sense of the world. There are two ways a story is used: one, to remind ourselves about what we already know, to confirm the opinion that this world is ours and we are the residents of the world. Secondly, to challenge the perception and the belief by testing it in the dramatic form which expresses and celebrates social and cultural values which are shared by the audience or dialectic show which challenges the social and cultural values to get the empathy from the audience. A story pays attention to problem-solving situations through dramatic enquiry. Children are involved in the problems and find

ways to solve them when they empathize with the fictional characters and their situations, they begin to think critically, identify different views, consider the possibilities and find alternative ways to overcome them. The story of *Oliver Twist* is clearly about good versus evil, evil trying to exploit the good, but good wins in the end. It is concerned with the nature of childhood yet it offers something that is different from the player's own vision, so it draws him in. And this makes the play a good choice for the kids of the streets of Chow Kit. *Oliver Twist* is one of hundreds of innocent children trapped in an adult world where they are doomed to either toil in the workhouse or to a lifetime of criminal activities with the criminal Fagin. However, from the sordid setting emerges a fairy tale. Oliver, although a passive character in the novel, meets with a happy ending. He finds kindness, family and love. He is fortunate. Do all the orphan children of the world dare to hope for that kind of happy ending, for happiness, for family love and kindness?

What the director did in this project is commendable as he has given these kids access to real theatre, provide them a safe environment to play and explore the experience through theatre so one day it will help them make certain important decisions, that they will be able to control their emotions in certain situations. The kids took the challenge and together they worked towards the production. They were trained in dancing, singing and acting and have benefitted from their involvement. Elementary school kids are given the opportunity to work together with their less fortunate peers. The production serves as a means of communication with a group of youngsters with different backgrounds and some from different cultures.

Vygotsky's theory of Social Constructivism states that children build on knowledge that they already have in them and develop skills through social interactions and social-cultural activities. Vygotsky believed that children learn through play. We can see that these theatre practitioners have different ways and approaches in their working out and playing with children but the end product is public performances for children by children, constructed from improvisations and workshops using well-known stories as active contexts through which children explore issue, identity and human behavior in social circumstances.

Engaging children with the reading and discussing the issues in the novel opens up a new world and understanding about the complexities of life, about human relationships, about making sense of the world around them, and giving them opportunities to look at life in new ways, exposing them to the concepts of the past and the present, is the objective of the collaboration in making theatre by two of these theatre groups. The *Ali Baba* production is obviously too big and the objective is obviously commercial. However, by acting out the characters from the fiction in the drama children meet different challenges of working with each other in the creation of these characters and their situations on stage where they have to make choices and decisions all the time. It is a learning process where the child's commitment is matched by the director's commitment and the whole production at the end connects them with the audience. The three collaborations by three different theatre

groups with children in producing theater for children through literature have been successful, as not only the participants have greatly benefitted from the values of reading and experience it themselves by living in that world of fiction, children in the audience have also been enlightened and entertained by the theatre.

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